

THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS

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NORTH CAROLINA QUAKERISM
AS SEEN BY VISITORS



by

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Many of the journals dwell upon the vicissitudes of travel. These indeed are of no little secular interest. I have lately read an account of conditions of travel which is limited to only a single century—the Eighteenth—and to the journals of Friends whose names happened to begin with A, B, or C.¹ Should we add the other centuries and other letters of the alphabet the total material from Quaker sources would prove most abundant.

Of course conditions slowly improved, yet even the more backward conditions continued beyond the frontiers of improvement. Thus what is related of early Carolina was repeated a generation or two later a few hundred miles further west, and is suggestive of what one still experiences in the wilderness. There is, for example, the story of Daniel Boone (of Quaker descent, if not himself a Quaker) who when asked if he was ever lost replied, "No, but I was once confused for three days." It is a temptation to dwell upon these features of travel as the journalists themselves did. One wonders whether to the settlers also the conditions of life seemed so formidable, the escapes from danger so narrow. Perhaps the visitors were tender-feet from the cities and not so used to roughing it. Whether they travelled by land or water, on horseback or afoot, they had much to contend with. One is inevitably reminded of the list of the apostle Paul in II Corinthians 11: "In journeyings often, in perils of rivers, in perils of robbers, . . . in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in hunger and thirst," etc.

One needed to be stout-hearted to venture on such journeys. Yet young women and women no longer young undertook them, and so did Friends of both sexes whose sensitiveness, not to say timidity, made them as responsive to weather, to swollen creeks, to mosquitos and to the dangers from wolves or Indians as they were to their own inner shortcomings in following the Inward Guide. Of one of his journeys, that to the Indians at Wyalusing, performed with horses and canoes in 1763, John Woolman wrote, "We had only a narrow path which in many places is much grown up with bushes, and interrupted by abundance of trees lying across it, which together with the mountains, swamps and rough stones make it a difficult road to travel; and the more so that rattlesnakes abound there, of which we have killed four; [so] that people who have never been

¹Mary C. Campbell, *The Difficulties and Dangers of Eighteenth Century Travel as Revealed in Quaker Journals*, an unpublished thesis for the M.A. at Columbia University, 1948.

in such places have but an imperfect idea of them.”² In the same context Woolman explains that while love was “the first motion” of this journey it turned soon into sympathy and fellowship in discomfort as he sat on a rainy day marooned in a tent and thought of what the Indians endured. The persistence and courage of these travellers in spite of such natural hesitation is a measure of their faithfulness.

The conditions in the Carolinas long continued to impress travellers by their remoteness and primitiveness. As early as 1681 there were two settlements one in each of the present states, on Albemarle and on Ashley River. George Fox, who had reason to understand their isolation, wrote in that year urging that they both should attempt to meet “once a year or once in half a year . . . somewhere in the middle of the country.” Evidently this was long unpractical. One of the first Quaker visitors to cross that gap by land was Joshua Fielding who arrived on the

25th day [of 12th month 1726/7] at Charlestown in South Carolina, visiting Friends meetings in Charlestown and on Ashley River . . . traveling through South Carolina desert, on 5th of 2nd month I entered North Carolina wilderness passing over Pamlico . . . cross Perquimans to Pasquotank . . . leaving North Carolina the 4th of 3rd month I entered Virginia.³

This is Joshua Fielding’s own account, now available in print. Samuel Bownas who met him later reports that he travelled in the Carolinas almost entirely alone, using a small pocket compass when the sky was overcast and in three weeks travelling for five hundred miles he saw only four or five houses along the way. Bownas himself was able to report that a road—apparently what Woolman would call a “trace” and we a “blazed trail”—had since then been laid out by the government so that Friends could pass along the same route “without so frequently lying in the woods.”

It is natural, however, that for many years to come Quaker visitors from England or from the northern colonies rarely penetrated to South Carolina and indeed many got no further south than Virginia. Elias Hicks, for example, seems to have gone no farther, either in 1797 or in 1813. But Patience Brayton in 1772 went as far as Georgia. How well she deserved her name of Patience her description of the journey makes clear.

²A. M. Gummere, *Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, 1922, pp. 264, 265.

³*Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*, XVI, 1927, p. 28.

It is only fair to those visited to remember that they were not unfeeling or unappreciative of the handicaps and faint heartedness of their visitors, who had left home and loved ones for months and years, at the certainty of pecuniary loss, and with a not remote probability of sickness and even death while among strangers. It just happens that the intimate feelings of hosts are not so fully spread on record as those of guests.⁴

We do have, however, evidence of their loneliness. William Edmundson described his North Carolina journey as "all wilderness and no English inhabitants or pathways, only some marked trees to guide people" and when he finally reached the house of Henry Phillips he found that their neighbors had little or no religion and that he and his wife had not seen a Friend for seven years. No wonder that a little later an isolated Friend, as we would call him, William Keeton of Rappahanock in Virginia, appeals to his Monthly Meeting to acquaint travelling Friends that he would welcome their visits.⁵ I am happy to report that later visitors found a substantial local meeting of Friends in that neighborhood.

Turning now to the successive semi-centennial decades we come first to the 1740's. John Woolman is the most notable Quaker visitor of that period to North Carolina, and it would be a great pleasure to see some reference to his visit on the original minute books here. His own diary gives the visit a single sentence: "We went on to Perquimans, in North Carolina; had several large meetings, and found some openness in those parts, and a hopeful appearance amongst the young people." This was in 1746.

My quotations for the 1740's shall be made from the account⁶ of a Philadelphia Friend, James Pemberton, of a well known Philadelphia Quaker family, who came in the autumn of 1745 on an overland business trip and apparently with no intention of making Quaker contacts. When he and his companion aimed at Thomas Newby's in southern Virginia they found that Thomas had already left for Yearly Meeting at Perquimans. So the following day as he continued he writes:

⁴From the records of one monthly meeting (Easton, Md.) I have lately compiled these provisions for visitors (apart from private hospitality): 1676 stock or meeting fund, 1678 a boat, 1681 traveling companions, 1684 guest room, 1690 a house of convenience, 1692 a horse, 1702 slaves, 1792 a wagon. *Friends Quarterly*, January, 1947.

⁵Rufus M. Jones, *The Quakers in the American Colonies*, 1911, pp. 309, 310.

⁶Manuscript at Library of Congress (with film copy at Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pa.)

We set out from Thomas Newby's about 8 o'clock for Perquimans hearing it was the time of their Yearly Meeting, tho a little out of our road yet chose to be there . . . and got that night to Samuel Newby's where we lodged and were kindly entertained being now in North Carolina.

8 mo. 5. We proceeded from Samuel Newby's being accompanied by himself for Perquimans where we reached about 10 o'clock . . . went to meeting which was about as large as our First Day meeting is usually. The Meeting House is situated on Perquimans River. It is about a mile over. After meeting we went home with Zachary Nixon's in company with several Friends who were all very sociable and kind. They are mostly a plain people and had an evening meeting at Z. N.'s house at which were about 20 people. . . . At this house a great number of Friends are entertained.

Leaving this hospitable home two days later James Pemberton mentions no more Friends but describes his journey over difficult rivers or through a vast piney wilderness. He mentions features of Edenton with fifty houses, Newbern "of about forty houses built scattering and mean, mostly wooden chimneys as is usual in these parts" and Wilmington "of about 100 houses" which "may be called the metropolis of North Carolina."

A somewhat parallel account of this journey appears at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in the form of letters written by the same traveller to Israel Pemberton, his father.⁷ But of his sole contact with Friends James gives only this advance hint. "As we hear there is to be a meeting in our road we intend to be at it . . . and if our horses are not too much fatigued hope we shall be at Edenton tomorrow night." As we have already seen, they stayed with Friends at Perquimans much longer. The object of the journey emerges more clearly from this correspondence. A ship loaded with rum and sugar, the brigantine *Tryal*, had been taken by pirates, and retaken by a Captain Davis with the province cruiser and brought to port in Frederica, Georgia. There it was held awaiting negotiation for expense of salvage. Its Quaker owners sent from Philadelphia two young members of the family, James Pemberton and his cousin William Logan, to arrange for its repossession and return. They travelled south by horseback and selling their horses they returned with the ship itself.

Pemberton's visit was primarily on business and hence it may be well to supplement his account with the report made to London

⁷Pemberton Papers, III, 178, 179, 181; IV, 2, 3, 12, 14, 15.

Yearly Meeting (and derived from its minutes)⁸ by Edmund Peck-over in 1743:

I think there are five meeting houses in North Carolina, in the compass of about 30 miles pretty much in a direct line. They have one meeting house, called the Old Neck, or Perquimans, [which] is a very large one, about fifty feet square and several galleries where their Yearly Meeting is kept. I suppose maybe six or seven hundred in number who profess to go nowhere else but to meetings in the compass of the forementioned number of miles. A plain honest people they seem to be. We had very good satisfaction amongst them.

For our visitors five decades later I shall choose the manuscript journal of Joshua Evans of New Jersey. It contains much more intimate and critical expressions than the twice censored form that was printed in 1837.⁹ In 1796-7 he visited in "fourteen months less four days" . . . "all meetings in the southern governments as far as Georgia." He arrived at Little River, North Carolina on 10th month 30, 1796 and the Yearly Meeting began the next day. In a guest book of very early date kept by an unidentified person in this Eastern Quarter and lately deposited in the Guilford College Vault is the entry: "Joshua Evins from haddonfield in new Jarsey at our Yearly Meeting at Simonses Creek 5, 11 mo. 1796 and Joseph Townsen from Boltimore." Evans himself says:

I attended the committee on revival of their discipline, that was short and to my satisfaction. I gave many clost [close] hints that seemed well received, though in the main but a poor, low, weak time as a Yearly Meeting.

His later visiting of local meetings is fully recorded. There is some suspicion that his mood was affected by outward circumstances and the latter interpreted by his mood. Everywhere in the South he felt the burden of slavery. For example on his visit at Upper Trent on Christmas Day he writes:

This is a poor barren country and I believe that a blast attends because of the oppression of the black people, and I believe Friends stands not clear enough to plead their cause, and people see they are not clean handed but will have them some way in their families because they can be had at a lower rate to do the drudgery than the whites. This the world saith. This is a just reflection, I fear, for mine eyes hath seen that which made my heart ache within me, and that in Friends' houses.

⁸*Journal of Friends Historical Society*, I (1903) p. 98.

⁹J. and I. Comly, *Friends Miscellany X*. Swarthmore College has both the edited MS. from which this was derived and the earlier journal which is much richer in detail.

On New Years he notes: "I thought the people's state in too general a way resembled the state of the country,—barren." At a "monthly conference" at New Garden he found that Friends gave such favorable answers to the queries that he told them "if they was as good as there represented there were not so many more as good on the continent as they was, but I had my fears that it was not so." He criticized the elders for "not filling their station in watching over those young in the ministry for good, advising against tones and that which would hurt their service, for I did believe the service of some was hurt by so much of a tone."

Joshua Evans must have been a guest hard to please. He had all the scruples of John Woolman and more besides. As he left New Garden finally for Virginia he reports (15th 6 mo., 1797):

A number of dear young women who came to see me set off as I had to travel near one hundred miles where was no Friends, these dear women Friends came with such things as they thought I could be free to use for I was led in a way different from my dear brethren for I could say that I did dearly love them. Yet I had a tender feeling towards taking life which I believed it safe to attend to, as also the use of imported goods whilst it commanded so large a supply of that which was the sinews and strength of war.

The year 1845 was a critical year in American Quakerism. It marked the Wilburite-Gurneyite division in New England, which had repercussions elsewhere. Several English Friends were in America and attended North Carolina Yearly Meeting. Accounts are extant from James C. Fuller and also from a young Friend of 24 years named Joseph Crosfield who accompanied James Hack Tuke. I should like to quote from it two phrases: "We are lodged at the school which accommodates about ninety Friends and am very comfortable there being only six Friends in our bedroom." "We have been introduced to so many friends that my plan is to shake hands with everybody I meet, being totally unable to remember them all."¹⁰ Another account was written for the *Friend* (London) by an unidentified English visitor, whose initials are variously given as F.L.A. or F.L.H. I quote part of it:

The Yearly Meeting for North Carolina is held at the "New Garden Meeting House," a large, solitary, boarded building, situated near the road which runs between Greensboro, and the Moravian town of Salem; it is capable of containing from fifteen hundred to two thousand persons. Its lonely situation, with no other house in sight, upon the verge of the

¹⁰*Bulletin of Friends Historical Society*, Vol. III, 1909, pp. 116f.

forest, the growth of many ages, may well attract the attention of the traveller, who can hardly fail to turn his horse a little to one side and reconnoitre. Immediately behind the meeting house, which is open on all sides to inspection, having neither fence nor hedge around it, may be seen a space of an acre or more in extent, cleared from the forest growth by which it is surrounded, and protected by a rough Virginian or snake fence from the intrusion of the numerous hogs which stalk about it, disturbing the otherwise unbroken stillness of the place, by their constant and unwearied rooting among the dry and sere leaves, which the hot sunny days and cool nights of this delicious "Indian summer" are rapidly loosening from the trees. . . . In the open space around the building, some hundreds of Friends have already collected, and are quietly awaiting the opening of the doors; the men and women have separated, and each party throngs around its respective entrance. This number is constantly increasing, for from all sides of the forest, multitudes are pouring forth; one is ready to believe that the very trees drop Friends instead of acorns! The shady wooded paths seem alive with the innumerable figures which are trooping down them, whilst as far as the eye can penetrate into the deeper recesses of the forest, one form after another is constantly appearing, now momentarily hid from view amidst the darker stems of the noble trees. Here in the thick branches, then emerging into some more open part, and thrown into strong relief by the bright sunshine. The pacing action of their tall bony horses, with high Spanish saddles and large saddle cloths, adds not a little to their peculiar and foreign air. Here a long procession of vehicles slowly wending their way, with such a variety of shape and construction, as those only who have seen them can imagine—from the humble "mud waggon" without springs, or light high wheeled "sulky" drawn by one horse, to the huge family waggon, or old-fashioned coach of some neighboring planter. These, scattered in all directions among the trees, as far as you can see—the horses often not taken out of the carriages, and simply fastened to the nearest branches—quietly wait until they are again wanted; there must have been at least five hundred horses thus loosely picqueted.

The material in which most of the Friends are dressed tends to give effect to this interesting scene. Close around the meeting-house might be seen groups of elderly men clad in home-spun woollen garments of varied hue, some clothed from head to foot in pale blue or blue gray, some in drab, and some in sandy brown, others varying their costume by an occasional change in the three colours, for instance, the blue coat may be relieved by a drab waistcoat and sandy coloured trowsers, or a sandy coat by pale blue trowsers, etc., etc. Further off, seated on the prostrate trunk of some fallen tree, are a number of younger men or boys, their dresses only differing from their fathers in

retaining a deeper shade of the various homely dye. The prim and neatly plaited white neckcloths, so common in our own Yearly Meeting, are either discarded altogether, or their places supplied by simple cotton handkerchiefs of diverse tints. Some indeed have departed altogether from the paternal simplicity, and assumed shades, which although more consonant with a citizen's idea of plain colour, are doubtless considered far more *a la mode*.

On the further side may be seen the women Friends, scattered in various clusters, or seated in long rows upon the fallen stems of trees (not a few have babies or young children with them): their neat white cotton bonnets with broad plaited crowns, glitter in the sunshine like satin of the purest white, or in the distance stand prominently out from the masses of dark foliage in which they are enveloped. . . .

Soon the house was filled to overflowing; for being a meeting for worship, many other than Friends had flocked from miles around to the "New Garden Meeting." The Governor of the State and many of the neighboring planters were said to be there.¹¹

For a sample of visitors' impressions in the 1890's I shall use an article in the Philadelphia *Friend* in 1894 by Joseph Walton, the editor and the clerk of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.¹² He begins:

In company with a few friends, I left Philadelphia on the evening of Eight Month 6th, taking the vestibuled train that runs from New York to Tampa, Florida—a distance of about fourteen hundred miles. We left the express train at Greensboro, and after breakfast took a local train which stops at High Point, a few miles further south, and which was the place of our destination.

Then follows a detailed account of the proceedings day by day. The writer's strongly conservative position shines through repeatedly in scarcely veiled criticism. He is concerned also about trust funds carelessly handled or about deeds of title to meeting real estate that had been lost.

Much that was said in exhortation in the meeting was uncongenial to this guest, showing "lack of discernment," emphasis on "going" to preach the gospel while "the necessity of knowing a Divine command for service . . . was practically almost lost sight of in the great prominence given to active work." The visitor noted "that there were opposing elements in North Carolina Yearly Meeting. One body of Friends was loyal to the ancient principles of the

¹¹*The Friend*, London, Seventh Month 1st, 1846. (N. S. Vol. IV. No. 43, pp. 135f.)

¹²Vol. 68 (1894-5), pp. 37, 51, 52.

Society of Friends. Others were disposed to favor an introduction of methods of work that were inconsistent with these principles. On these rested the responsibility for the trouble and suffering into which they introduced the brethren."

These critical remarks are not pleasant reading today and one turns instead to external matters. Joseph Walton's hobby was botany and one shares his evident regret that he took little opportunity of becoming acquainted with the local flora. It might have profited him more than did attending the sessions in so critical a mood. He does describe some species and he gives this general picture of Yearly Meeting half a century ago:

The Yearly Meeting formerly met at New Garden, in close proximity to the boarding-school. When the college was organized, it gave this building to the college and removed its own place of meeting to High Point. Here it owns about seven acres of land—the most of which is a grove of hickory and oak, which furnishes shelter for the horses and vehicles of those who come to the annual gathering. In it a tent is erected, in which overflow meetings are occasionally held on First Day of Yearly Meeting week, when great crowds assemble from the surrounding country.

My interest in reviving these sample views of North Carolina Quakerism at intervals in the past is not mere antiquarian curiosity or a love of the quaint. Conspicuous as are the outward differences between our time and the past, more important to notice are the inner differences. We should not let the apparent likenesses deceive us into thinking that either the local Friends or their visitors, for all the continuity in our Society, were not inwardly often far from our point of view. Or rather we should recognize how far we have diverged from their mentality. Even when our behavior is like theirs or our interests seemingly identical we actually do not and cannot revert to their patterns of thought.

The peace testimony among Friends, for example, has a long and continuous history. I am interested in the happy accident that the first extant minute book, fragmentary and broken as it is, begins in the middle of a sentence with the words "be seen generations to come." The next sentence explains: "It was thus the Government made a law that all that would not bear arms in the musterfield should be at the pleasure of the court fined." That was in 1680, but it sounds most topical in 1948.

Yet how different a matter it is for us in this day to bear our testimony against all war, both negatively and positively! New arguments appeal to us in place of the considerations which affected early Friends. Few of them thought in terms of the economic implications of war. They had only the most limited knowledge even of the political factors leading to war. Their concern was a much simpler, self-originating affair, more naive according to our standards. That they were steadfast and courageous in their generation is an example to us, but we must be faithful to our well considered interpretation. The unchristian character of war is more evident today than ever before.

The same may be said of the Quaker concern against slavery. It was very slow in growing and differed *toto caelo* from the spirit of modern reformers. To a degree which we can scarcely believe, Friends' anxiety was more for the slave owners than for the slaves. Their fear, however, was not mainly of uprisings and natural processes of economic instability and loss. I have only just lately discovered for the first time a Quaker appeal to the abstract principles of the rights of man and more recently a case of a Quaker exposition of the economic preferability of a free labor enterprise.

On the other hand Friends were keenly aware of the philosophy of direct divine judgment on evildoers. The cloud which they saw on the horizon was not a natural result that they expected but God's direct, immediate supernatural intervention to punish evil-doing.

Very noticeable, too, was the early Quaker sensitiveness to the reputation of the Society. They felt its solidarity in a way we do not. They did not take the easy view that each Friend should do that which is right in his own eyes. Trust in individual guidance and faithfulness did not go so far as to do away with all corporate testimony. Without excessive authoritarianism they developed a real society of friends, whose radiating influence brought benefit to many of the best movements in the community.

A good illustration of inner changes is provided by another centennial that has just been observed, the hundredth anniversary of the first Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, on July 19 and 20, 1848. It has been well said that on such occasions one unveils not only likenesses of men's—or women's—faces,

but also one should unveil their minds. I am particularly impressed by the temper of the opponents to that movement. Their criticisms seem today so violent, so unreasonable, so intemperate and uncalled for. It is hard for us to believe that men would forbid Lucretia Mott and other women delegates to participate in the Anti Slavery Convention in London in 1840, or refuse to let another Quakeress, Susan Anthony, speak at a temperance meeting in Albany in 1852. And since the opposition was of such a mood, naturally these women, who claimed for women generally what Friends had so long and so largely enjoyed within our Society, could not approach the subject as we can today.

An anniversary usually stresses continuity. I have emphasized changes, especially inner changes in the past two centuries and a half of North Carolina Quakerism. It requires profound historical imagination to bring these attitudes objectively back to mind. As John Woolman said of the Pennsylvania wilderness in words already quoted, "People who have never been in such places have but an imperfect idea of them." I am not suggesting that we attempt to adopt the precise states of mind of our ancestors. Efforts to reproduce today the thought patterns of the past are neither possible nor desirable. Conservatism in theology or in practice is self-deceived if it thinks by repeating the same words or forms it is recovering early Quakerism. As the Latin proverb has it, when two persons say the same thing, it is not the same. What is needed is a living vital religion suited for the Twentieth Century, retaining and adapting whatever in our history is useful for the present.

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